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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MINSK 000110

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SUBJECT: LUKASHENKO'S "REACHING OUT" TO THE WEST: POSTURING
RATHER THAN POLICY

Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stewart for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

11. (U) In his latest public appearances on January 25-30, the Belarusian President slammed Russia's energy prices and indicated that his country was ready for a dialogue with the West. In usual form, Lukashenko deflected blame for poor relations with Belarus' neighbors. He admitted that Belarus' foreign policy was not working but claimed it would not change drastically trying to appeal to the West. Denying he was a dictator, Lukashenko compared the opposition to infamous terrorist groups, called mass media a weapon, and played down the importance of a parliamentary system of government. Opposition activists cautioned the West not to believe Lukashenko's "act" of friendship, warning that the Belarusian president could not be trusted with implementing democratic reforms. At this point, Lukashenko's appeasements to the West are simply rhetorical; neither he nor his regime have demonstrated that they recognize the need for extensive democratic and market reforms or have the will to make them. End summary.

Bringing West and Belarus Closer: If Only Rhetoric Were Fuel

12. (U) In a December 25 interview with the German newspaper "Die Welt," Lukashenko lauded the EU for taking an interest in what was "really" happening in Belarus during the Russian gas and oil crisis and forming an "objective" conclusion. The Belarusian leader noted that the EU's interest could be the starting point to mending fences with the West. Lukashenko did not rule out that Belarus in the near future would accept the Euro as currency, noting that Belarus had no debt, low inflation, a hard working labor force, and an intensive, stable economy that produced cheap, quality goods that were competitive on the EU market. Belarus economy operated within the parameters of EU market regulations. Therefore, the EU needed to open its borders to Belarusian goods. The president invited Western and U.S. investors to Belarus, claiming that they had nothing to fear and noted Belarusian plans to modernize existing infrastructure and create 500 new enterprises within the next five years.

"Time For Dialogue With the West is Here"

13. (U) The Belarusian leader suggested the EU be more independent from the U.S. in forming policies towards Belarus, alleging that the recent EU statement condemning Belarus' municipal elections as fraudulent was a U.S. fabrication. Lukashenko said that the time for cooperation

had arrived, adding that he was ready for an open and honest dialogue. However, the West needed to abandon its "medieval" visa ban, claiming that Belarusian officials could not "jump over fences."

¶4. (U) Lukashenko suggested working with the EU on January 26 while awarding diplomas to PhD recipients. After slamming Russia, the president stressed that it was time for Belarus, the land bridge between the East and the West, to have normal relations with its neighbors. He admitted that Belarus had too long been "flying with one wing" with its foreign policy, but denied that Belarus was at fault for souring relations with the West. He claimed that the EU realized it could not meet its energy needs without Belarus. However, the GOB would not drastically change its foreign policy appeasing the West.

¶5. (U) Lukashenko in a January 30 meeting with the head of the Communist Party of Russia Gennady Zyuganov again stressed that Belarus should seek better ties with the West. He denied that the current energy row with Russia was the reason for change in policy to the West, although he spent most of the speech castigating Russia for using economic levers to steal Belarus' independence. According to Lukashenko, Belarus' multi-vector (foreign) policy turned out to be a single-vector policy. Now it was important to improve relations with the West, since the EU finally realized that it depended on Belarus' energy supplies.

Russia Subsidizing Belarusian Economy - Absurd!

¶6. (U) In the "Die Welt" interview, Lukashenko criticized Russian President Vladimir Putin's assessment that Russia subsidizes 41 percent of the Belarusian budget, calling it an

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estimate that even a novice economist would laugh at. Lukashenko claimed that Russia doubled the price of gas for Belarus in 2004 and again in 2006 and accused Russia of using economic pressure to acquire Belarus' modernized oil refineries. According to the president, Russian citizens disapprove of their government's behavior towards Belarus because they still remember fighting side-by-side with Belarusians during World War II.

Belarus Will Retain Independence

¶7. (U) Lukashenko vowed that Belarus would never become part of Russia as long as he was president. The presidential "institution" was the main securer of Belarus' sovereignty and independence. Lukashenko countered arguments that his actions were violating agreements made on the Russia-Belarus Union and accused Russia of refusing to accept a constitution because it did not want Belarus to have equal rights.

"I Am No Dictator," But I Act Like One

¶8. (U) Lukashenko claimed that the West had formed a false image of him as the last dictator in Europe. Belarus was a democratic country and its leader chosen by the majority of the people. He added that in Belarus, the commoner rules and he is not deceived by the negative propaganda financed from abroad. Lukashenko stressed that his third term as president was legal because it was put to a referendum and supported by the majority of Belarusian voters.

¶9. (U) Lukashenko maintained that opposition forces and authorities do not have equal rights in any country. He likened the Belarusian opposition to the ETA and Sinn Fein, saying that as terrorist groups they were also not allowed on prime time state television channels in their host countries. According to Lukashenko, mass media was a "menacing weapon" that could "execute" a democracy just as easily as a

totalitarian government. However, in the same interview, Lukashenko claimed that opposition forces in Belarus enjoyed "free access" to media, such as Radio Free Liberty and other foreign news sources "sponsored by the U.S."

¶10. (U) The president voiced his disapproval of a parliamentary government in the CIS countries, claiming they do not promote the interests of the people. According to Lukashenko, Belarus' parliament before his term as president was full of irresponsible deputies who fought and spread rumors for self-promotion and not for progress. Fortunately, the referendum (1996) and Lukashenko's election as president stabilized the situation and brought Parliament to order, leaving the Belarusian people satisfied.

The Opposition Reacts

¶11. (U) Opposition and civil society activists cautioned the West about falling for Lukashenko's "act" of friendship. On January 30, independent pollster Oleg Manaev called Lukashenko's calls for dialogue "populist tricks" and predicted that Lukashenko will not meet the West's demands to reform the market, ensure the freedoms of speech and assembly, and free political prisoners. Human rights activist and director of the NGO Charter 97 Andrey Sannikov warned the West not to sacrifice its principles of democracy and human rights in order to reestablish dialogue with Lukashenko.

¶12. (U) De facto opposition leader Aleksandr Milinkevich on January 31, while in Germany meeting with the German Bundestag's Committee on Foreign Affairs, warned the EU that trusting Lukashenko to bring democratic change to Belarus and believing a dialogue can be established with the dictator was "naive" and "dangerous." Milinkevich criticized the EU for engaging the Lukashenko regime, referring to Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe president Rene van der Linden's January 18-19 official visit to Minsk (reftel). Milinkevich stressed that Lukashenko would use all contacts with the West to preserve his hold on power. According to the opposition leader, dialogue was not out of the question, but only on the condition that the GOB release all political prisoners, stop cracking down on the independent media, and implement other democratic reforms.

Comment

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¶13. (C) The diplomatic community in Minsk was amused in early January with Lukashenko's "deep appreciation" for the "assistance provided to Belarus" by the U.S. and EU against Russia. Since Lukashenko's remarks, the state media has been consistently citing PACE President van der Linden's visit as an example of the West's interest in a dialogue with Belarus and underscoring the EU's alleged "dependence" on Belarusian oil products and border security. However, we and, thankfully, our European colleagues here view Lukashenko's olive branch to the West with extreme caution. Neither he nor anyone in his regime has given any indication that Lukashenko intends to implement the democratic and market reforms the USG and EU have demanded in exchange for substantive dialogue. More likely, Lukashenko's lip service to the West aims to maintain the faithfulness of his domestic constituency, who may be wondering if Belarus is indeed isolated. Moreover, as plans progress for a visit to Belarus by Iranian President Ahmadinejad, it is clear that Belarus' new realities have forced the regime to seek partnerships with any country willing to offer economic and political support, including with the West. However, he is not likely to forge any new relationships at the expense of changing his style of governance.

Stewart